

ON BETRAYING FAMILY

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When my novel in stories, *One Hundred Years of Marriage*, went up on Amazon my joy at having a book in print was accompanied by a queasy stomach. There in full color was the image of the book cover and a price, making my words available to anyone in the United States or Europe or, God help me, my hometown in Oklahoma. Readers who knew my family were going to say I'd thrown four generations under the bus. Of course, I put a disclaimer page at the front: *"This is a work of fiction. Any references to real people..."* But I know that's not going to keep people who see traits or actions they recognize in my characters, and think my work is autobiographical.

This is a good sign, a credit to the writer. This is also a big problem. When a writer creates a story, she is looking to invent a sense of reality so vivid readers will feel this writer's great grandmother actually went berserk on a claim in Oklahoma Territory and was delivered to an insane asylum. Or they will believe her little brother really did build a canoe in an attic room with no door wide enough for the canoe's removal.

The problem for me with the launch of my book is that my family and some friends know that my great grandmother really did spend years in the Lincoln, Nebraska Asylum. And that unbelievable story

about the canoe in the attic? It is patterned on my own little brother alone building a canoe in a closed attic space.

Why did I use these vivid, identifying facts in this book? I could have made up plenty of scenes and metaphors to tell stories about a boy on the Oklahoma prairie traumatized by a suicidal mother or a family who could not break out of their claustrophobic lives. But I didn't.

Once I was "inside" the stories, writing them, I took what floated up. I trusted in that part of myself over which I had little control: my imagination—that busy little factory that spun the straw of reality into the gold of fiction, that took everything I had read and heard, everything that I knew and was, all my nightmares and old ghosts to create the stories that made up this book.

I fed that imagination with research. For instance I hired a lawyer to get a court order to release my great grandmother's records from the state mental hospital. What I learned was that she was not insane, but had several times been "incarcerated" after episodes of what may have been extreme post-partum depression. Much more troubling: the last incarceration began on February 14, 1898, right before her husband and their grown children loaded a wagon bound for Oklahoma Territory. She was not "paroled" until October, 15, 1913, a few months after her husband had died. Her oldest daughter brought her to live in Clinton, Oklahoma where my great-grandmother

acquired a reputation fitting a Quaker woman—quiet, loving, industrious, a gentle soul who always “took up for the unfortunate.”

I picked and chose from her life, taking the personality whole, but leaving out three daughters as well as all the realities of life inside the Lincoln Asylum, facts that my point of view character, her son, Dan, couldn't have known and which would have distracted from the story of this family's marriages.

The Lincoln Asylum and the canoe story are not what had me nervous and exposed to the world last April. The problem was the narrator's father has much in common with my own father. Although my father died before publication, I didn't want people to think I was actually writing about him. So I had made up a great deal, exaggerated flaws, left out some virtues, and told myself I was creating a fictional character. What I did not do was make that character tall, peaceful and Nordic, so he could never be recognized as my small, angry, Scotch-Irish father. Why did I let myself in for criticism for having exploited people I loved and who loved me? I didn't ponder this as I wrote, but I realize now that inserting the tall Swede would have been like sewing a bit of scrape metal into a patchwork quilt. If I had made this character tall, peaceful and Nordic, the whole fabric of my story would have unraveled. The wife and children would have had to be

different. It would have been a fiction without resonance or breath, a story that belonged to some other writer, not mine to tell.

Will my cousins on both sides of the family forgive me for the unvarnished rendering I gave characters who resembled our grandparents? Maybe, maybe not. Why did I let myself in for this?

When I was inside the book—writing—I was not attempting to write memoir. I hadn't had the kind of horrid upbringing that kindles a burning desire for revenge, the territory that compelled the prize-winning writers, Mary Karr or Lucy Grealy, to come to terms with awful childhoods. The truth in my case was that my childhood was lucky although burdened by my parents' marriage which was a life-long, uphill climb for both of them, the theater major and the engineering student, married during the Depression in Oklahoma. My mother didn't go to her university graduation ceremony to receive her diploma for a Bachelor of Fine Arts because she had nothing to wear. Besides, she told me, she was exhausted from having carried a full course load while working full-time trying to feed herself and help her parents financially. My father worked one job that provided his breakfast, another that provided his room, and a third that gave him supper, all the time dealing with dyslexia as he studied engineering. No wonder these two poorly-matched people clung to each other. The Great Depression forced many couples into marriages not simply of convenience, but of survival. To my mind, these were heroic people

My mother's father was a short story writer. When I go back to the browned, typewriter-hammered pages of his work, much of it memoir, I see a heroic effort to avoid mentioning anything painful. I am in possession of his wife's diary, a dime-store volume someone must have given my grandmother late in life. Reading it broke my heart. Page after page, erased, some torn out. That generation's bequest regarding anything important was silence.

Now, two generations later, I, another writer, have found a voice to tell a story that is mine to tell.

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